The Purpose of Blood

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The Purpose of Blood

by Basingstoke

Summary

"You go very still sometimes, so still you hold your breath. You're doing it now. Why?"

"I'm listening," Hannibal says.

Notes

For Luminosity, because she inspired it.

"When I was a boy..." Will says.

Hannibal listens. His eyes are closed because there is nothing to see; vision is a function of light striking the object and bouncing into his eye. He feels Will instead, breath expelled from dear Will's lungs and manipulated by his throat and tongue and teeth, concussing the air between them to vibrate through the translucent stretch of Hannibal's own ear drums, creating a sensation that his mind interprets as words. He listens to the words but also feels the thrum of blood through the rope-thick vessels of his heart, hears the whisper of fine hairs on his forearms, the slide of nails against bedclothes, the soft chemical process of intestine turning pieces of cow into Will.

It's so much; it's too much. He wants to live in this moment forever; he wants to rewind it backwards and forwards, so that he can focus in on one piece of the tapestry at once, at the blood or the breath or the skin or the gut, but not miss the words that Will is (with his lips and his tongue and his teeth and his throat and his lungs) carving into his brain with a series of miniscule taps.

"You go very still sometimes, so still you hold your breath. You're doing it now. Why?"

"I'm listening," Hannibal says.

“Hmm.” Will moves in his arms, stretching out his shoulders, lengthening his spine so that tiny pops of bone against bone bubble against his skin. He holds Hannibal’s hands in his own. He moves his neck and presses his skull against Hannibal’s, compressing delicate skin between hard bones. Inside each skull, a separate and unique brain swims in its own private sea. This fluid, separate and distinct from blood, unites brain and eyes and spine and nerves and allows the body surrounding the brain to know that another brain is nearby. Their brains —their utmost selves—can never touch. They rely on the concussion of light and air against the body to know each other. He—this brain he calls himself—is utterly alone inside the human vessel, but so are all men.

Will strokes thumb against thumb, causing friction against the tiny nerves embedded in his skin that send information to his brain, and Hannibal knows that he is not alone in this bed, even if he is alone inside himself.

“When I was a boy, I raised rabbits. We never had enough money, so in the grand tradition of boys in the country, I helped out where I could. I built a hutch out of chicken wire and scrap wood and I fed them on weeds and onion tops. I put a sign out on the main road. Rabbits. Pets or meat.”

Oh, Will. There was always so much more to discover. “How many wanted meat?” Hannibal asks.

“Most everyone. I would slaughter them for free if I could keep the skins. It only took a minute. Break the neck, cut the belly, peel the skin, cut the paws and head, remove the guts. I gave them the meat in a plastic bag and traded the skins to my neighbor for fresh tomatoes.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve to thirteen. After that, we moved to a place without a yard.”

“Did you name them?”

“No. Yes. I knew them individually, but I didn't name them. The buck, the old doe, the brown doe, the spotted doe.”

“You cared for them, knowing that you would likely kill them.”

“Yes.”

“Did it trouble you?”

“No. Survival can be very...close. I was old enough to know how hard it was for us to eat every day. The rabbits were a resource that became available to me, so I used them as painlessly as I could.”

"I know how close survival can be," Hannibal says. "I ate far worse than rabbit."

"I know."

*

“Just be yourself,” Will says. “I already know you’re not human.”

“But one must pretend. Wouldn’t want to spook the horses.”

They are lingering over coffee and brigadeiro at a streetside table in Rio de Janeiro, enjoying fresh air and the pleasures of the city. Around them, over ten million unsuspecting people and a few monsters like himself. They travel freely; it is easy to be a rich white man nearly anywhere.

To confuse recognition, Will is clean-shaven and close-cut, sleek and elegant in a way he has never before been, and Hannibal has dyed his hair a brilliant snow-white. The effect is to make himself look older and Will look kept. This is aided by Will’s plastic surgery. The scar Hannibal carved into his forehead and the knife wound the Dragon left in his cheek have been covered up and the skin pulled Botox-smooth.

He looks younger. Undamaged. Like someone else. Will thinks Hannibal hates this, but Hannibal knows Will at a level so much deeper than his face. He would know Will faceless, voiceless, skinless.

"What are you thinking?" Will asks.

He reaches out a hand, takes Will's hand, and kisses the tip of his finger; the scaffolding of bone, the covering of skin, over the bare nerve, the delicate filament of what Will truly is.

"I am thinking of you, my darling," he says.

He isn't interested in Will's body. Only in Will.

*

He reclines between Will's legs and examines his abdomen. He presses his ear to Will's stomach to listen to the secret rumble of his gut. He finds these sounds intensely satisfying. He enjoys, too, the private wildness of Will's body, so rarely shown to others. He finds the pattern of hair as it transforms from transparent fineness on his sides to thick, curling spirals in the crease of his hip.

"We still haven't had sex," Will says. Hannibal hears the echo of his voice through hip bone and femur. "It's been months."

"Haven't we? I suppose not. You indulge me in so many more private desires. Are you deprived, my dear?"

"It's occurring to me, now, when a month ago it didn't." He strokes Hannibal's cheek. The signals from facial nerves travel all the way to the spine before returning to the brain scant millimeters from the touch. By the time he knows the touch has happened, it is over. Perception lags behind reality.

He crawls up Will's body and settles over him, inner thigh to outer thigh, hands sinking into the mattress by his shoulders, nose pressed beside his nose, right eye looking into his left eye. The eye sees his eye upside down and the wonderful brain flips the image, the least of the unconscious transformations the brain makes of the outside world. He wishes feverishly that he could touch his eye to Will's. He feels that he would see something never yet seen, that brains would communicate directly, that they might unite.

But he cannot—their facial bones are far too prominent, and to remove them would be a conclusion—so he kisses Will instead. The mouth is exquisitely sensitive. Every tongue is an athlete's muscle. Will's mouth grows hard on his as they kiss and his hands grasp at Hannibal's rump.

His hands slide up over the round scar of Mason Verger's brand. Will snarls into his mouth in reaction. "My darling Will," Hannibal says. "You have no idea how much I enjoyed that mark."

Will's hands soften and he furrows his brow. "You can't have enjoyed the mark in itself. The pain?"

"Not the pain."

"No, not the pain. No, it was the memory. The connection to the day," Will says, closing his eyes, imagining himself into Hannibal. Hannibal wishes he could feel Will inside his mind. He imagines Will like cool mist rising into his mind palace, surrounding but not disturbing the placement of his memories. Seeing him, all of him, beyond the limitations of tongues. "The burn of the brand is bright and vivid in your mind. When you feel it during your imprisonment, you think of the day when you held me in your arms, and then lost me, and then captured me again, and you are reminded that this is a victory." Will opens his eyes.

Hannibal presses their skulls together, forehead to forehead, rolling cheeks together, pressing his eye to his jaw, then his ear to his throat. Will inhales and air is pulled into his lungs, where the fresh exchanges with the stale in the tiny vessels of his capillaries, and the engine of his heart pushes the bright blood past Hannibal's ear into Will's hungry brain. It is the most essential of life's processes, the lungs and the heart, the blood and the air, so essential that it does not need to be a pleasure. Hannibal finds pleasure in it anyway.

"I find I do want," Will says. "I know that you're good with your mouth. Show me your skills." He strokes his fingers through Hannibal's hair again.

Hannibal presses his mouth to the ocean's rush of Will's blood and follows the flow down through his heart to his abdominal aorta, so vulnerable beneath the tender skin and muscle of the stomach. He pauses at the scar he put there and kisses it. "This would have been more beautiful if you were not so tough, my dear Will."

"I noticed it wasn't a very smooth cut. It wasn't a very sharp knife. Shame on you."

"Next time will be more surgical, I promise."

"No recovery next time. I've had enough recovery. Cut my throat if you're going to cut me."

"But I would want you to survive after I cut you."

"And I don't want that. Let me be or kill me."

"An impasse," Hannibal says.

"Guess so. Stop admiring your handiwork." His face is soft; there is no bite in his words.

"I assure you I am not admiring this ugly scar. I prefer the one I left on your mind, which has formed you into a different shape entirely."

Will's hands cup around his throat. Hannibal wonders if he will let Will strangle him, or if his own desire for life will outweigh his desire to satisfy Will. Will sighs, though, and moves his hands to Hannibal's face. There will be no murder today. "I told you to stop admiring your handiwork," Will says.

Hannibal smiles and moves down to kiss Will's thigh. The femoral artery is protected by the cage of the hip but re-emerges in the thigh, protected only by curls of hair, silken skin, and a cushioning layer of fat. He bites gently, testing the depth of meat. "You are still too thin."

"Keep feeding me," Will says, sending a shiver down Hannibal's spine. There is desire; it is a possessive desire to put new things inside of Will, to change his makeup, but he can turn it into sexual desire as he slides his hand under Will's thighs and takes Will's penis in his mouth.

This is another use for blood—to bring this organ from soft vulnerability into stiffness, into something that prods into the back of his tongue and his soft palate. He takes it into his throat and listens for Will's soft sighs of pleasure.

The function of a nerve is more subtle and less straightforward than the functioning of blood. Blood is mechanical; it carries cells, it circulates oxygen, it functions hydrostatically. Nerves are a part of the brain and so they are something quite other. They transmit the intensity and quality of touch into an experience in the mind. The fact of skin contacting skin becomes: this is the first time we are engaging in sexual intercourse.

And he is, of course, not immune to such experience. Semen is not as interesting as blood but it has the interest of novelty. He tastes it thoroughly, nose in the crook of Will's thigh among the fresh gamy sweat, and he listens to Will's breath in his lungs, and he strokes his thumb over the bones of Will's hand.

*

He feels playful today--they are in the mountains, which makes him giddy and loose with lack of oxygen--so he makes chocolate skulls with tart lime cream inside.

Will feels playful too. He is lounging in bed reading, diagonal across the lush velvet coverlet, naked under his untied robe. When Hannibal strokes his calf, Will strikes at him with a small knife.

He doesn’t connect, of course, but he comes very close. Hannibal hangs on the bedpost and eyes him. Will returns his look under lowered lashes, then obtrusively looks back to his book. A small smile tugs at his mouth.

Hannibal starts circling the bed. Will doesn’t roll over, but his back tenses under the robe. Hannibal darts for his knife hand and misses as Will rolls forward onto his right side and slashes out with his left hand. Will doesn’t connect either; he bares his teeth, breathing heavily. His robe has fallen open. He is growing erect.

Hannibal picks up a pillow from the bed. Will kneels up, watching him, switching his knife back into his right hand. His smile and his erection are growing stronger.

Hannibal feints, so that Will thrust his knife into the pillow, and Hannibal shoves him backwards onto the bed pillow-first. They grapple for the knife, Hannibal’s knee pinning Will’s thigh. Will slashes through the pillow and the blade emerges in a cloud of down, but Hannibal slams hand and pillow both to the side and pins his wrist.

He kisses him. Will bites his lip and tangles a hand into his hair, yanking hard; Hannibal comes up laughing. When Will lets go of the knife, Hannibal lets go of his hand, and Will rolls them both over and straddles his chest, pushing his erection into Hannibal’s mouth.

He strokes Will’s thighs and sucks him. The salt of Will’s skin teases the bite in his lip. He watches Will’s face, glee and transcendence. He tastes Will’s bitter come in his mouth and swallows.

Will sits beside him and caresses Hannibal’s upraised thigh and rests his cheek on Hannibal’s knee. Hannibal watches his lovely face as he begins to think. He takes Will’s hand—his knife hand, his dominant hand—and places it on his penis. “What are you thinking, my dear?” Hannibal asks.

Will begins to stroke. It is a pleasure, but the greater pleasure is in watching the fleeting expressions of Will's face. "Thinking about future plans."

Will's fingers have softened. He lets Hannibal choose his clothes and toiletries, and the result is that Will is sleek, shining, and beautiful. He draws looks; strangers have asked if he is some person famous from Instagram. Sometimes Will says he is.

"It's been one year," Will says. "You haven't killed anyone since the Dragon, unless I missed something."

"You haven't missed anything." He obtained their medical care and identities the ordinary way: buying them on the criminal market. They are very good identities. They were raised by a specialist who created birth certificates, records of infant immunizations, school admissions, university qualifications, hints of a career. His identity had all the aspects of life except a body and a will of its own; this was all he could grant it. In turn, it granted him freedom of movement. He was, he thought, the greater beneficiary in this exchange, but that, of course, was what the enormous sum of money was for. "We must maintain the useful fiction that we have died."

"It's more than that."

"I didn't want to kill without you, and you weren't yet ready. You needed to heal and gain strength. I am patient."

"Stop being patient. I want Bedelia on a plate," Will says.

Blood rushes through him. His eyes dilate, the tiny hairs on his arms prickle erect, and he comes in Will's hand; all of this autonomous and separate from his mind, which is caught in the sound formed by the closing of Will's tongue on the back of his teeth.

*

They eat the chocolate skulls, sip whiskey, and plan. "Surveillance is the first step. It has been a long time since I saw her," Hannibal says.

"Less time for me. She thinks she got away from us."

Us. He swirls with hot pleasure. "If she sees you, will she look for me?"

"Probably. Yes. She'll know."

"So we take her by surprise."

*

Bedelia lives in high-security seclusion, wrapped in layers of guards and wires. Hannibal has long practice in evading the first. As for the second, he is watching Will demolish her house with a pocket full of hand tools.

Hannibal would have gone to her front door, grabbed her, and taken her to a third location, but he admires Will's approach. People think of a house as a whole, Will said, and protect the openings. But in fact, anything built can be unbuilt.

Will cuts the nails that hold the wood siding to Bedelia's house and silently eases boards from the frame. Beneath the wooden skin is fluffy pink insulation, which Will handles with extreme care, and then the metal uprights and nervous system of wires are exposed.

Will simply avoids the wires and metal and cuts into the inner wall of the house with a drywall knife. He pushes the wall into the dark house. The entire operation is hidden from the outside by evergreen shrubbery.

They slip inside. It is a Saturday. They will have all of Sunday to themselves.

*

Will opens the wine--from New Jersey, intriguing--as Hannibal sees to the presentation of the salad.

They enter the dining room. Bedelia is waiting, hands shaking and leg steaming.

"Have I complimented you on your kitchen yet? It is excellent," Hannibal says.

"I never used it," Bedelia says.

"A shame. Perhaps the new owners will."

"Unless we burn the house down," Will says.

"Will. What would be the point of that?"

"Watching entropy reclaim human effort? I thought that was your favorite."

"Not quite my favorite," Hannibal says. He serves the salad and pours the wine.

"How are you finding married life?" Bedelia asks Will. Her voice is as tremulous as her hands, though there is no fear. It is only a physiological shock reaction.

Will takes a bite of salad and chews slowly, savoring. "Fulfilling," Will says at length. "Being in sync with someone for the first time in my life, singing from the same page."

"Even if the other person wrote the song?"

"In a partnership, two people join their efforts to create something new between them."

"New," Bedelia says, dropping her gaze to the dish of leg before her.

Will frowns slightly. He is nettled. Hannibal sips his wine, watching.

Bedelia stirs the salad with the tines of her fork. "Eat," Hannibal says. "You will not lose anything additional by enjoying yourself."

"Perhaps I wish to be the one who did not eat the pomegranate," Bedelia says.

"I'm afraid no person has that honor," Hannibal says. He had served Freddie Lounds vegetables in a dressing of his own devising.

"When a goose is force-fed, its fattening is the work of the farmer," Bedelia says. Her eyes flick over Will.

Will sets down his fork. He inhales, then picks up his wine glass. His eyes meet Hannibal's, crinkled with irritation; his jaw is set. Will is so terribly sensitive.

"I have always been good at feathering a nest. It was a new experience to do so for a mate and not a guest," Hannibal says. This prickles Bedelia. He hides his smile behind his fork.

Bedelia looks at Hannibal, picks up her wine glass, and pours it over her plate.

"That is discourteous."

"Sorry to muss your nest," she says. She takes the plate and starts to pour the mess over the platter of leg, the platter he spent half the night and all day on, and this makes him jump up--

Will already has her wrist in a punishing grip, rescuing the meat. Bedelia looks up at him, eyes smiling, and stabs the fork concealed in her left hand into his neck, high at the juncture of his jaw.

Hannibal strangles her, crushes her throat, her mouth opening like a laugh as he drops her body to the floor. He ignores the tiny gurgle of life leaving her body as he takes Will in his arms.

Will, gasping, panting like a dog, hands raised but not touching the sharp metal piercing the structures of the throat. The fork quivers in time with his heart. Blood oozes, ready to spurt as soon as the metal is removed. "Dear Will, my dear, you must trust me," Hannibal whispers, and Will makes a clicking noise in his throat and spreads his shaking hands.

He straps Will's head to a carving board to keep it still. He sits Will carefully in the back of the car. Slowly, terribly slowly, he drives.

The house is open and blazing with light behind them. He doesn't care.

*

Frederick opens the door and immediately urinates on himself.

Hannibal ignores his choked words. He takes Frederick into the kitchen, sits him on the stove, ties him, gags him to stop the high shrieks as Frederick tries to squirm away from the elements. He ignores the scent of urine. He ignores that which does not matter.

He escorts Will into the house and locks the door behind them. Slowly, delicately, he helps Will to recline on Frederick's stainless steel countertop.

Frederick's shrieks subside but his muffled words continue. Hannibal ignores him; he cuts away Will's shirt, as Will looks at the ceiling with pupils as wide and black as the void. Hannibal has his medical bag, of course, so he has transfusion tubing and needles at the ready. He sticks Frederick with the needle. Then he numbs Will.

He starts the transfusion, removes the fork, and stitches Will's artery with thread thinner than a hair as Will shakes beneath his hands.

Will loses too much blood, and faints, but he is alive at the end of the operation. Hannibal kisses his forehead once he is closed and bandaged.

Then he turns to Frederick, still sitting on the stove, gag loose in his mouth. Hannibal looks at it critically, noting that his distress--he can think of no other term--hampered his usual neatness.

Hannibal leaves the transfusion tube in place and starts to clean up Will's blood. "I'm A negative, hardly a universal donor," Frederick murmurs.

"You had access to his medical records. You should recall."

"I don't memorize the medical records of everyone who has ever been in my care…. well, I suppose *you* do, you crazy bastard," Frederick mumbles. He is listing to one side. Hannibal takes him down and removes the needle; he drains every useful drop of blood into Will.

"There are a number of practices that make me a better physician and psychiatrist than you, Frederick," Hannibal says. He helps Frederick to lie on the floor.

"Will I die?"

"I haven't decided."

"I don't fear death anymore," Frederick says. "I fear pain. Please don't burn me again." His burned face is less expressive now, but there are tears in his blown-wide eyes.

"I will not burn you. Death from exsanguination is quite peaceful. You grow cold, and then go black." He presses his lips to Will's forehead again, checking his temperature. Cold. "I will likely bleed you again soon."

"Oh," Frederick says. He faints.

Hannibal cleans the blood with bleach and sponge, rinsing the evidence down the sink, wiping fingerprints, dirt from shoes, tiny hairs. He cleans up Frederick's urine and does not even despise him. At last, Frederick recognizes the leopard in the room.

He presses his mouth to Will's forehead again. Warmer. Will's eyes stir beneath his lids.

He comes to a decision.

*

Will is pale as cream. "How do you feel?" Hannibal asks.

"Familiar," Will says. He looks at Hannibal and crinkles his eyes ruefully. "That didn't go very well. I underestimated her."

"You always did, I'm afraid."

"And we didn't even get to eat her, unless you brought a doggie bag."

"I did not. I was concerned with other things." He kisses Will's forehead, finding him warm. "Rest. I will fix you something."

He checks on Frederick next where he is leashed to the frame of the living room pull-out couch. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Contemplating the course of my life as it reaches its inexorable end. You promise that you will not burn me?" Frederick is also dreadfully pale beneath the livid scars.

"I promise. In fact, I will give you some painkiller. You saved Will's life."

"Thank you," Frederick says. His voice and body seem small. Hannibal supposes this is meant to evoke pity as a conscious or unconscious defense. It doesn't work on him, of course.

The damaged flesh will pose a certain challenge with butchering Frederick. He will be interested to see what sort of marks Abel Gideon left inside his body, though, and the shape of his bullet-shattered skull. Perhaps he will keep the skull. It is a trophy of the process that brought him and Will together.

He leaves Frederick with honeyed yogurt, fruit, tea, and a drip of saline and morphine. He returns to Will with the same.

"Is Frederick Chilton in the living room?" Will asks with high skepticism.

"I needed a blood donor. He lived nearby, he is compatible, and I felt confident he would not transmit any diseases."

"And you couldn't resist."

Hannibal touches his cheek. "In fact, that did not figure in. I would never play games with your life."

"You've spent six years playing games with my life."

"With your mind. I was sure you would survive."

"You pitted me against Tobias Budge. You barely survived him. Hell, I barely survived Chiyoh."

"I will not play games with your life going forward," Hannibal amends.

Will laughs at him. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

Will eats as Hannibal listens to his heart and gut, measures his pulse and blood pressure, and changes his bandage. He spends a long moment staring at the throb of blood held back by the sutures he made in Will's flesh.

"Is recreational surgery next?" Will asks.

"No. I just told you, I will not play with your life." He replaces the bandage and kisses Will's cheek. "But my dear, you should have known that the smallest dogs have the sharpest teeth. Have you never picked up a Chihuahua?"

"Shut up," Will says. He kisses Hannibal back.

*

After lunch, Hannibal decides to transfuse Will again. He will suck Frederick dry like an orange and transfer every precious drop into Will; then, perhaps, braise him in wine, a replacement for their spoiled meal. He debates the merits of French wine versus German and the availability of vegetables in season.

Frederick moans softly when Hannibal hangs him upside down. "Over soon," he assures Frederick. He helps Will into a chair beside him and readies the tubing and needles.

There is a tap at the window. Bird, Hannibal thinks, turning; this is a quiet place, secluded, that no person would happen across--but beside him, two young men are at the window. Young men barely more than boys, wearing cheap white shirts and black trousers and ties, name tags clipped to their pockets. Their faces are masks of horror.

"Mormon missionaries," Will says, starting to laugh. One of the boys takes his phone from his pocket. "Chilton, you lucky bastard…" He is still laughing as Hannibal carries him out of the house and into the car, grabbing only his medical bag from the floor as he runs.

The boys are on the wrong side of the house to run over, worse luck. Hannibal spares some bitter words for God as he drives.

*

Night finds them in a boat off the coast of Florida. Will reclines in his arms; his lips turn blue whenever he stands, so Hannibal is keeping him as horizontal as possible. Will's heart beats too fast, too shallow. He regrets the loss of Frederick's blood acutely.

"So we were caught."

"No. Only seen."

"We will be caught. Shall we rampage or vanish?" Will asks.

Hannibal touches his cheek to Will's. "Which would you prefer?"

"I was better at vanishing, obviously," Will says. "On the other hand, we've done that already, for some time. On the third hand…" He squeezes Hannibal's hands lightly with his cold fingers. Hannibal holds him close under the blanket. "I'm in no shape for anything but lying here and generating red blood cells. But on the fourth hand, where else can we go?"

"There are a great many places to go. Warm places, to put some color in your cheeks. We could sail to Australia tomorrow."

"But what do you want?" Will asks.

"I have everything I need."

"What do you *want*?" Will repeats. "You must have had some plan, some kind of end game."

"Never," Hannibal says.

"You're not lying but I don't believe you."

"I tell you over and over that you worry too much. You think too much. Look up," Hannibal says into his ear. "Each point of light a star, a galaxy, a God. An alien spacecraft. A meteor come to kill us. Why are you thinking about tomorrow when we have now?"

Will looks up. After a moment, he relaxes back into Hannibal's arms. "Hakuna matata," he says. Hannibal bites his ear and he laughs.

He could live in this moment forever, and so he does. Will's voice vibrates his ear for eternity. He inhales salt and sea for eternity. There is no past; there is no future; there is the weight of Will's body in his arms, the light of the stars above them, and the shared focus of their minds, so close to connection, as near as they can come, for eternity.

He is so very happy.

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